



FUSE

Executive Hiring Excellence



VP of Product



STEP 1 :

Understand the company's needs and the skills you are hiring for

Before you set out to hire your VP of Product³, it is important to:

1. Identify the company's current stage of growth + the help you are looking for as CEO
2. Understand what traits matter for the company's current stage
3. Attract and go after an individual that is stage appropriate

**** Note:** The following proposed framework is for an early-stage VP of Product. You may need to adjust your framework based on your company's maturity. ******

TO BEGIN: Define your needs as CEO

Depending on the founding team's skills, the proper time to hire a VP of Product will vary. These are the likely scenarios where hiring a VP of Product makes sense:

1. You are a product-savvy CEO, "wear lots of hats", and need to transfer work.
2. You are more of a business-minded CEO, and do not have product depth. You therefore realize you need strong product leadership. *

*** Note to CEO:** at this point your resources are likely restrained from a capital and equity standpoint – so if you are a business-type CEO, consider hiring a CTO first who is product savvy (aka a person who is capable of both setting the product vision + can execute on building out the vision).

KEY TAKEAWAY - Understand which of these buckets you are in – There are different ways to achieve the same goal. If you are a Founder that has previous product experience and can interface well with the technology team, then perhaps you don't need a VP of Product yet. However, if you are a more business-minded person, you will likely want to hire a product person (and then outsource the tech build). Alternatively, you may choose to hire a technology-minded person/Co-Founder who can both develop the product AND build it.

Examine your options and choose the best path accordingly.

³ **VP of Product Defined:** A VP of Product is someone who has a sufficient level of product/technical depth, but is also business-savvy and can communicate across the org. It is different from a CTO in that they are heavily aware of & involved in broader business objectives.

NEXT STEP: Reflect and identify your expectations

Before you set out to hire a VP of Product and craft the job description, you as the Founder/CEO need to spend time introspecting and defining what success looks like for the role. You must be prepared to share your expectations and desires upfront with candidates. As such, reflect on the following questions:

1. Who are you as a leader/contributor? In the case of product, you need to ask yourself questions and reflect critically about your skills and values.

- If you are a savvy, visionary product person and want to continue shaping product strategy, then you should consider bringing in a counterpart who can solely help you execute. Do not seek out a candidate to lead the product vision if you have no desire or intention to give that up.

2. What responsibilities you are willing to let go of? What role will you truly be asking a VP of Product to play? Are you ready to let go of being the sole driver of the product vision?

- It is ok to hire a VP of Product that is good at executing, if you still want to set the macro product vision + high level construct. Just be sure to articulate that! Many product leaders in the talent market may want / expect to drive (or at least have a part in setting) the product vision.

3. What does success look like in the next 18-24 months for your company?

This will help illuminate the skill set you need to hire for.

- Craft the job description to reflect this to make sure you are attracting the right candidates + skill sets.

DISCLAIMER: This is one of the hardest roles to frame, find and hire for.

The VP of Product role is not as tangible and measurable as other executive roles (i.e. a VP of Sales can measure how they are performing constantly).

It is a real-time role that changes a lot, so you need to be fully aware of this when hiring.

STEP 2 :

Build a stage framework

Directions: See the stage framework below. Output of this is for you to 1) define your product leader needs based on your company's particular stage of product development and user engagement; and 2) understand how your product leader(s) should evolve over time.

Pre-monetization – you will likely not need a VP of Product at this stage

- The company is building an MVP.
- The team is talking to pilot customers and iterating on the initial product.
- OR the founding team has an idea for a business and may or may not have the product building capabilities (depends on the product expertise of the founding team – i.e. perhaps there is a product-savvy Founder, and they just need a CTO or outsourced help to build it).

Pioneering Product-Market-Fit (PMF) – this is often the first stage where a VP of Product comes in, depending on the skill set of the founding team / needs required. Your company will look as follows:

- The initial MVP is complete or near completion.
- The Founder/CEO is still the primary conduit to the customer because they can aptly articulate and iterate out the customer need.
- If there is a technical Co-Founder, or an outsourced technical team they will be building out the product.

Early trial and scaling – At this phase, a VP of Product can be increasingly important to have. Your company will look as follows:

- Gaining a great deal of input/learning from early trials with users/ customers.
- The team is struggling with prioritization on product roadmap priorities.
- The CEO is too busy to run the product roadmap process individually, or does not have significant experience doing it.
- The business model is (most likely) not crystallized.
- The current product leader (may be CEO or CTO) does not have an intermediate layer – aka is not managing other managers; but rather working with individual contributors and as such, has higher involvement with the details.
- Product team is maybe one FTE.*
- **When hiring a VP of product in this phase, an ideal candidate:**
 - Will be able to work well with the CEO, technical team members, and individual contributors.
 - Will be a “Player-coach” (meaning they can contribute directly + manage others) and have a previous track record of managing leaders.

***Note to CEO:** the product team will never become very large, as there will be lots of “dotted lines” between them and other stakeholders/ groups within the company. Take caution! Often as companies scale, they hire additional product managers to solve product decisions/ problems – but hiring too many, too early can complicate things.

STEP 3 :

The mandatory deliverables of a product leader

Overview: The following provides an overview of the four critical traits/deliverables of a product leader. Understanding these will help you prioritize and have full awareness about the person you hire. You need to be comfortable with the strengths and weaknesses a candidate brings to the table.

(1) Broad Business Acumen and insatiable curiosity – The role of a Product leader is multifaceted and requires a person to be a terrific orchestrator or “bridge builder”. Their work is interdisciplinary and will require cross-collaboration with many different company stakeholders. As such, a VP of Product needs to be a “four-legged stool” – knowledgeable about: 1) the customer, 2) the company, 3) the product/technology, 4) the Sales enablement process. See each of these components explained below:

1. Customer:

- A VP of Product is in many ways defining the customer objectives and how the product should be built to fulfill those objectives. As such, a person in this role should always focus everything their team does back to the customer.
- A VP of Product should be generally curious, and show interest in not only what is occurring within their company – but also what is occurring at their customers’ companies, in the market at large, the competitive landscape, etc.
- This role requires dealing with a significant amount of input from customers – some of which will be useful, some not. As such, the VP of Product needs to have a good filter to determine which customer product feature requests are “signal” versus “noise”.
- Once a VP of Product determines which selected feature requests are actionable, they need to set a realistic timeframe for the team to complete them. **Note to CEO:** The ability to do this well and communicate outcomes effectively is crucial, as the VP of Product will also need to help the Sales team translate the product feature enhancement decisions back to the customer.

2. Company:

- A strong VP of Product understands their company’s positioning, business objectives, the broader context of the customer, and the company’s “north star” goal – all of which will help inform the product roadmap.
- This leader must have a broad understanding of multiple business disciplines and how they interact. They can’t think in isolation apart from the business and customer objectives.

3. The Product/ Technology:

- VP of Product must have sufficient technical depth to be respected and influential with product development, the Sales organization, and the executive leadership team. They do not need to be an expert at everything but must be knowledgeable about a lot of things.
- Relevant background experience: if the candidate does not come from a relevant customer-type background (i.e. Enterprise, Consumer, etc.) it may be difficult for them to effectively shape your company's roadmap. It is possible it could still work, it just may require more time to ramp.

4. Sales Enablement: A VP of Product ultimately needs to drive product adoption through the Sales team. This manifests in the following ways:

- The VP of Product needs to have a strong flow of customer information (requests, feedback, etc.) from Sales – and in turn, must translate the product priorities in a way that the Sales team can understand and reiterate back to customers.
- The VP of Product plays a big role in defining product messaging for sales personnel to use in their customer conversations. Product leaders are often seen as the initial marketer in a company, as they usually help curate the narratives for salespeople to use.
- The VP of Product helps articulate the product “hook” and the product value messaging. And then educate sales on how to integrate that messaging into customer conversations.

When screening for this area in interviews:

- Try to understand if the candidate thinks like a businessperson or a technical person. Were they deep in the business model when speaking about their previous company (or when speaking about your company)? Do they think the way the CEO and investors would think about the business?
 - Ask about the revenue growth and business model of a prior company that they worked with. You will use this as an opportunity to see if they were a key business leader, or a technical person that was abstracted away from the business.
 - **Note to CEO:** Things to look for when the candidate is sharing their response: Were they enthused about the TAM and aware of competitors, etc.? Ask how they prioritize on the roadmap from the perspective of driving a high-priority business objective.
- Ask them about a product they might use frequently (i.e. Amazon) and what feature/ component they would change. (**Note to CEO:** you want to assess that the candidate is constantly thinking about the ways to improve a product. Will they apply detail-obsession to the product they lead at your company?).

- Ensure domain-specific knowledge is sufficient. It is ideal if the candidate has familiarity with your customer type (i.e. B2B, Enterprise, Consumer). Ask questions that pertain to your broader customer type to uncover competency and experience here.
- Are they a sophisticated problem solver? Ask the candidate to reflect on a previous experience where a product “went sideways” – and how they helped fix it.
 - Have the candidate describe examples of prior involvement in a product re-do. Perhaps these instances include the initial product not being built properly, or the product not resonating with customers.
 - How did they tweak the roadmap to get the product to PMF?
- Ask the candidate questions about your company’s product and business. They should be prepared and bring a point of view. It is fair to expect this.
 - **Note to CEO:** If the candidate does not offer suggestions to improve your product in the first interview, then you know they have not done their homework OR they are not “product minded”.
 - Also, if the candidate lacks insights about your company’s product, market and competition they are probably not a good fit.

(2) Cross functional leader and influencer – as mentioned above, the VP of product needs to work well with and drive decision making across many parts of the business. It is a unique and difficult role to do well. They must lead people well even when those who are not direct reports. How this will manifest:

- Ability to build out the product team well and build cross team collaboration and processes.
- Skilled in influencing people across the business whose functional skills might be deeper than their own in a particular area – i.e. Sales w. customer feedback loop, Founders/ Execs w. business objectives, Engineers + UX/UI w. product.
- Good personality and the ability to influence is highly critical, as well as the ability to drive difficult decision making when cutting from a product plan.
- Ability to inspire the product team + engineers who are building out the product. They need to set the vision and create an ambitious target, so talent remains excited about the long-term product opportunity at the company.

When screening for this area in interviews:

- Ask questions that test if the candidate is an amazing communicator, clear thinker, and “great simplifier”. Their ability to distill complicated concepts on the product side and articulate it crisply to team members in other areas of the business is crucial.
- Understand the candidate’s experience with escalation. Finding the right candidate for this skill will be a byproduct of the person’s stage of career + personality type.

- In some cases, you might consider a younger product person. As such, it is important to understand their experience handling escalation and resolution. Ask about specific scenarios to gauge if they have ability and comfort doing this.
- **Note to CEO:** It is way harder to escalate to the senior team than people think. In many cases, escalations will be issues that the product team missed. The VP of Product is a “truthsayer” role that is oftentimes emotionally complex.

(3) Super-skilled at translating customer needs into specific product deliverables –

This component pertains to the points discussed above in that the candidate needs to be well-rounded, customer-obsessed, and an excellent communicator.

- An ideal candidate has enough technical depth and understanding of how customer is going to use the product that they can properly interpret issues being surfaced from the sales field.
- Once issues are interpreted and validated, the VP of Product then must pass it on to the product development team to create specific deliverables.

When screening for this area in interviews: Take a case approach – start broad and go deep!

- Ask the candidate about the most impactful product they have developed (keep it vague, to understand how they define “impactful”), and how it particularly served their target customer segment.
 - **Note to CEO:** Asking broader questions here can be a good test to see if the candidate has clear thinking and can distill nebulous questions.
 - Observe how they engage when you ask these broad questions. What follow-up questions do they ask to better understand the intent of the question? When they are responding, are they always tying it back to how it served the customer?
 - Ask about their processes for defining the customer, use cases, and assessing how the current product stacks up competitively.

(4) Experience driving scalable product adoption –

- A newer trait of modern product leaders is the ability to drive product-led growth. A product leader should always think about ways to “growth hack” (i.e. a build a self-serve product, stickiness, and virality features, etc.).
- A VP of Product needs to identify novel areas already native in the product that can create a compelling “hook” to drive adoption.
- The role requires tremendous experience interfacing with Sales to continually evolve the GTM playbook (i.e. honing in on the key initial target customer, determining when to expand to secondary targets, etc.).
- **Note to CEO:** When considering the broad reach of a VP of Product, they are effectively leading via a “mini CEO” role or as General Manager. For example, in enterprises like MSFT, product leaders are responsible for the P&L of the product they are in charge of. The VP of Product is a product AND business owner.

When screening for this area in interviews: Ask the candidate to tell you about a product journey they have been a part of that they are most proud of. Ask them to describe the experience from an impact perspective.

- After the candidate shares their overarching response, dig into the product-specific items they built. Then go upstream to understand what the impact was on the actual business as it pertains to customer adoption/ revenue growth.
- Ask about their experiences interfacing with, influencing, and impacting Sales.
- **Note to CEO:** Pay attention to how the candidate responds to questions. If you feel that a candidate is speaking like a GM of the product while interviewing, that is a strong signal! Alternatively, if the candidate describes previous experiences strictly from a product-insular, functional perspective – **Red flag!** All responses need to demonstrate cross-functional orchestration.

STEP 4 :

Thorough Diligence is a MUST

Now that you understand your company's needs + the key deliverables for the product leader you are targeting, it is important to do the proper work upfront before the interview room. Note: many of these components are repeats from the VP of Sales role's diligence checklist, however they are still relevant for the VP of Product.

(1) Tips on reading a resume - things to pay attention to:

- **Find a demonstrable track record of success** – make sure there is evidence of the candidate moving up in their career (i.e. vis-à-vis the companies they joined and roles attained). You want to know the candidate is constantly trying to improve.
- **Frequency of job change** – if there is a lot of “job hopping”, dig into the reasons why. You want someone who is a *builder*. If they are only at a company for one year, they likely did not build anything substantial while there. This is especially important given, the cross-functional engagement required. It will take time to build effective processes and relationships.
- **Are they an “A-Player”?** – Did they work at winning companies? Generally, “A-Teams” hire “A-players” and will drive significant output from them. Be sure to investigate the candidate's prior companies and see if they have reputations for strong accountability models. If not, it is important that the candidate is aware of that and articulates it to you.

(2) Cautions right off the bat – before and during interviews:

- **Referrals** – Do not advance internal, or in-network recommendations too quickly – dig in deeper. Do not immediately assume that the candidate will be a fit just because they come in referred from people you trust.
- **Do not assume executive recruiters are the reference check** – DO IT YOURSELF.
- **Listen for “I” statements versus “we” statements** – “WE” needs to be the primary word used by the candidate when they speak about prior experiences. The work of a VP of Product requires contribution from a multitude of team members – it is not a solo journey, so the candidate should not be speaking as such! (Exception: candidate is a junior product person / individual contributor – and perhaps did not have a broad, cross-team role)
- **Never hire someone after one interview!** – The CEO needs to spend ample time with the candidate.
 - Every time you talk with the candidate, you should like them more and more – the conversations and momentum should build upon each previous conversation.
 - You should feel like you are gaining value from each interaction and getting more excited with each interaction.

(3) How to complete good reference checks:

- **Allocate substantial, quality time** – reference checks are beyond a “check the box” activity. Product leaders are the most important decision you’ll make alongside your Sales leader, so it is important that you spend ample time preparing for and conducting reference checks.
- **Ask for a well-rounded, “360-view” list of references** – Ask the candidate to provide references from three different levels – someone who worked above them (manager), a peer* (i.e. engineering and sales), and a direct report. This will help you understand their ability to influence.
- ***Ask for references from different disciplines** – i.e. a person from sales, marketing, executive team, technology, etc. Candidate should have a broad set of references here. If they do not offer these up initially – ask. It is possible the candidate is younger and lacks this set of references, but if they do, it is a very strong positive signal. Here you will be able to cross reference the candidate’s ability to be a multidimensional influencer/ leader.
- **Understand what you are asking about / looking for** – Most people will not agree to do a reference call if they do not have good things to say. As such, make the conversation about FIT, not about generically judging whether this person is “good” or “bad”.
- **Spend time preparing the list of questions** – this is crucial for ensuring you get the most out of the diligence call. Be sure to ask questions that aim to figure out what the person can DO, not what they are like (at least at first). As noted above, culture fit is important and something to address, but you must first understand what the person is capable of, as this will be the initial go/ no go point.
- **Do a lot more LISTENING than talking on these calls** – the more talking the reference does, the more you will learn and the more data you will collect. A good rule of thumb is: 90% listening, 10% talking.
 - **When you talk:** Any speaking you do should be to describe the role and traits you are looking for upfront. OR what you want to validate and / or risk areas you want insight on. Once you have stated those items upfront, direct the conversation from there.
 - [**Note to CEO:** If someone is vague in explaining why said person is no longer at their company, they are probably not disclosing something to you = **RED FLAG.**]
- **DO NOT be swayed by a single reference.** Use it as a data point, not the absolute truth.

